Editor's Note

PAUL GLASTRIS

The Tyranny of Prestige

This month we present our third annual *Washington Monthly* College Guide. As in previous years, our aim is to offer an alternative to the *U.S. News & World Report* and similar college guides. Those guides focus on what colleges can do for you. We focus on what colleges are doing for the country.

The rankings begin on page 42, and as you'll see, the results diverge sharply from the rankings most of us are used to seeing. Princeton, number one on the *U.S. News* list, comes in seventy-eighth on ours. Texas A&M, rated sixtieth by *U.S. News*, is number one on our list.

Surely, you might ask, we don't *really* think that Texas A&M is *better* than Princeton? Well, yes, in a way. Remember, we aren't trying, as *U.S. News* does, to rate how selective or academically prestigious a given school is, but rather how much it contributes to the common good. The whole point is to recognize the broader role colleges and universities play in our national life and to reward those institutions that best fulfill that role. After all, almost every major challenge America now faces—from stagnant wages to the lack of fluent Arab speakers in the federal government—could be met in part by better harnessing the power of our colleges and universities.

So instead of measuring, say, the average SAT scores of incoming freshmen, or the percentage of alumni who donate money, we rank colleges based on three criteria: social mobility, research, and service. In other words, is the school recruiting and graduating low-income students? Is it producing PhDs and cutting-edge research? And is it encouraging in its students an ethic of service? By this yardstick, Texas A&M really does outperform every other university in America (a nose ahead of UCLA and UC Berkeley).

Ah, you might say, isn't academic excellence also an important—arguably the most important—gauge of a school's contribution to the country? Sure it is. And if we could get reliable data about how much learning is going on in American colleges, we'd eagerly include it in our rankings. But we can't: the sound data that does exist, compiled by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), is kept under wraps by colleges and universities. *U.S. News* can't get the data either, which is why its editors must resort to statistical alchemy.

And even if we *were* able to include trustworthy data on academic quality in our rankings, the results would likely still scramble the traditional hierarchy of academic prestige we all carry around in our heads. As we explained last year (see "Is Our Students Learning?," September 2006), experts who have seen the NSSE data report that many elite schools don't do all that well on these academic measures either. Prestige simply isn't synonymous with good teaching. Indeed, as Kevin Carey shows elsewhere in this issue—see "America's Best Community Colleges," page 24, and "Built to Teach," page 29—some unknown community colleges offer more challenging educations than do certain well-regarded four-year universities.

In addition to reliable numbers on academic performance, there are other kinds of data we'd love to get our hands on. For instance, to fully measure a school's commitment to service, we'd ideally like to know how many of its graduates become teachers, social workers, or public servants employed by the government. The Education Department could generate these numbers fairly easily by matching state employment records against individual graduation data from colleges and universities. Unfortunately, colleges won't disclose that information. And their lobbyists in Washington, citing dubious privacy concerns, have blocked all efforts to mandate such disclosure (see "Inside the Higher Ed Lobby," page 35).

Part of the reason that schools fight disclosure is that they don't want Washington challenging their autonomy. Part of it is also the fear that if the public had solid information about the quality of the education offered inside the classroom, colleges and universities would be under all sorts of market pressure to change the way they do business. (And indeed they would be—that's why we favor it.)

Ultimately, though, keeping a lid on this information isn't in the public interest, nor is it in the long-term interest of most colleges and universities. It merely protects a few dozen pricey schools that, for reasons more of legacy than of merit, are able to monopolize the upper ranks of prestige while robbing many "lesser" schools of a glory that is rightly theirs.

In any Washington interest group, policy is usually set by a handful of powerful members. Higher education is no exception. But occasionally, the majority revolts. That may happen, sooner or later, in the higher ed world. We hope that the *Washington Monthly* College Rankings help spark that revolution. WM